

Farmers And Climate Change

ISU Sociologist Gauges Ag Producers' Thoughts On Climate Issues

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

There is a lot of controversy surrounding the weather lately. From the Midwest drought to April snowstorms to violent hurricanes hurling up the East Coast, the weather seems to be in the news more and more. Many people attribute this perceived increase in extreme weather events to be the product of greenhouse gases and global warming, but that is still up for debate in many circles. And even among those who believe climate change is to blame, it's unknown whether what we're experiencing is a normal cycle in weather patterns or the lead up to something as major as the Ice Age.

"As we all know, climate change can be a sticky discussion," said J. Gordon Arbuckle, Jr., a rural sociologist at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, who conducted a poll on corn producers in 2012 to gauge their perceptions on climate change and its effects on agriculture.

While science overwhelmingly supports the concept of climate change and that it is at least partially man-made, the public is less confident. Arbuckle was curious as to how farmers felt on the subject.

"Agriculture is both vulnerable to climate shifts and a source of the greenhouse gases driving changes," Arbuckle said. "Climate change-related threats to agriculture represent threats to society. Calls for adaptation and mitigation strategies are increasing. Adjustment to potential natural hazards depends on perceptions of the risks."

The survey polled more than 4,700 farmers in the U.S. Corn Belt. Respondents were located in 22 watersheds, representing 60 percent of the nation's corn producers. The survey targeted larger-scale corn producers, those grossing at least \$100,000 annually, from South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. Arbuckle saw a 26 percent response rate, out of 18,800 total farmers who were sent the survey, which is comparable to the U.S. Ag Census.

Approximately two-thirds of respondents believe that climate change is happening, either due to natural changes or to natural and man-made influences. Few believe climate change is due to only human activity. This leaves about one-third of respondents who



PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

A shriveled pumpkin on bare soil serves as a reminder of what last year's weather did to the region's agricultural land. While many farmers believe climate change is happening, there more diversity of opinion as to its causes.

don't believe climate change is happening.

The scientific community foresees major changes to the Corn Belt, including increasing number of droughts and extreme heat events, excessive precipitation when it does rain or snow, more pest and disease issues, less fertile soil, and more soil erosion. When polled on their views of these weather effects, regardless of their beliefs in climate change, two-thirds of respondents were most concerned about drought, heat, and extreme rain events, followed by worries over weeds, pests, and disease. Arbuckle found this particularly interesting in that the survey was completed by February 2012, months before 2012's extreme drought began to grip the region.

"There's a lot you can do about a lot of different concerns, but there's not a lot you can do when the water shuts off," he said.

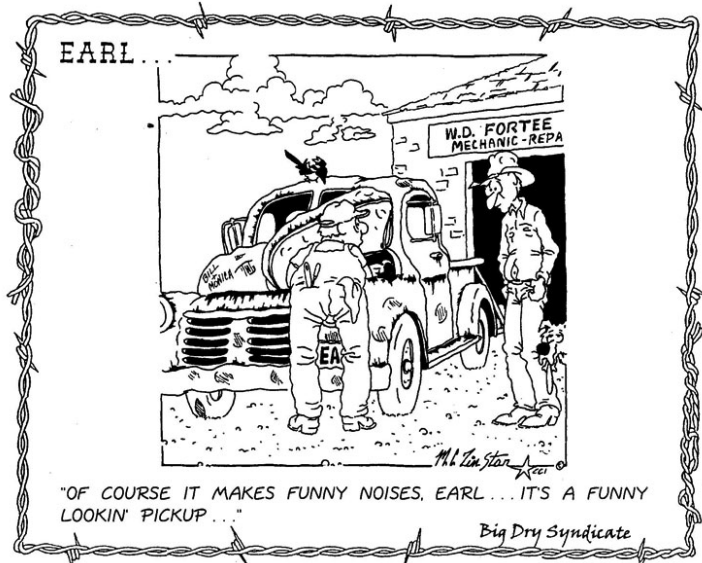
Further analysis of the survey found that the farmers who believe that climate change is happening and that it is at least partially caused by human activity are much more concerned about the potential weather impacts, Arbuckle says.

Moving on to how producers should adapt to climate change, the poll found that two-thirds of respondents feel the responsibility lies on seed companies to develop crop varieties appropriate to the new climate, University Extension to help farmers adapt, and farmers to embrace this support and then do the work to adjust their production practices. Less than half of respondents felt the govern-

ment had much responsibility in helping farmers adapt to climate change, from a production point of view, but rather, they feel the government should be more involved in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and other causes of climate change. Fewer farmers felt that they needed to do more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on their farms, even though research shows that 10 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions from human activity are attributable to agriculture. In essence, farmers do not support greenhouse gas emission regulations as much as climate change mitigation efforts, Arbuckle concludes.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents feel that chemical dealers have the most influence on their decision-making process. About half feel that crop advisors have major influence on their decisions. Government agencies, including the Natural Resource Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency, as well as University Extension have less influence on the respondents, while farm organizations have relatively little. Arbuckle finds this interesting, because chemical dealers and crop advisors are much less likely to educate on climate change mitigation, including the best-management practices of cover crops, reduced tillage, and nitrogen management.

"While most farmers do not believe that climate change is caused by humans, there is more uncertainty or disbelief associated with the lack of a support network," Arbuckle said.



Next 'Managing Drought Risk On The Ranch' Webinar April 24

BROOKINGS — While this past week's snow has brought much needed moisture across the state of South Dakota, the presence of the drought has not disappeared.

"Recent rain and snowfall across the state has brought some tangible relief to the ongoing drought conditions," said Laura Edwards, SDSU Extension Climate Field Specialist. "Despite this beneficial storm event, the long-term drought lingers and is still a concern."

Short term relief in some pastures and top soil moisture across southern South Dakota will certainly help launch the growing season off to a good start. But continued precipitation will be needed this year to maintain decent moisture for crops and range-land production, since there are such large carryover deficits from last year.

Cow/calf producers, land owners and ranchers must still evaluate the condition of their pasture and range land and determine the stocking rate which their land can sustain, says Kaly Waters, SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist.

In an effort to be proactive and help producers understand those tools that are available, the Live-stock staff at SDSU Extension have partnered with University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension to host a five part webinar series with the focus of helping ranchers across the state prepare for the possibility of the drought continuing in 2013. This series of meetings is titled

"Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch."

One hour webinars are presented the last Wednesday of each month, concluding in May. All sessions begin at 9 a.m. MST or 10 a.m. CST at the SDSU Extension Regional Centers. Each session will include current drought updates, forecasts and presentations about specific information or tools. Following each webinar, the regional centers will join together via video conference for a question and answer session, with SDSU Extension State and Field Specialists presenting additional information relevant to South Dakota producers.

During the April 24 webinar, Stan Boltz, South Dakota NRCS State Range Management Specialist and Jeff Printz, North Dakota NRCS Range Management Specialist will be speaking on the Drought Calculator and how it can be used to assist in stocking rate decisions. The presentation will be followed by a live question and answer session where attendees can ask questions directly of Boltz and Printz. In addition, SDSU Extension Climate Field Specialist Laura Edwards will give an update on the states weather and drought status.

For more information visit www.igrow.org, contact your nearest SDSU Extension Regional Center or call Kaly Waters, SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist at 605-842-1267 or Pete Bauman, SDSU Range Field Specialist at 605-882-5140.

Opinion

Consumers Are Real Powerbrokers In Ag Animal Rights

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

As a farmer, it's almost funny as to how some people regard animals. I like my housecats, but they are cats, not people. The difference is a lot more than that one is covered in fur, with a long tail and whiskers, and says "meow." It perplexes me that people would equate their pets-or, oops, companion animals-on the same level as people. They're dressing their dogs, sending pictures of their parrots in the stead of family Christmas cards, cooing in baby talk to their iguana, and sharing a bowl of cereal and the spoon with their pot-bellied pig. Fish, finches and venomous snakes are just about the only pet animals that are left with their dignity intact and not personified as extended members of the family.

And now we're seeing that same principle applied to farm animals, and not just the stock dog and barn cats, but the chickens, cattle, and hogs that end up on our dinner plate.

I'm all for caring for our animals. They need to be fed, watered, have their barns bedded down, given veterinary care, protected from predators, and given space to roam because that is what is right. They are living beings, and since they depend on us,



Rita BRHEL

they deserve the respect that any living being that depends on us deserves. The same applies to a cactus in our kitchen — the cactus is living in a pot where it relies on us for water and access to sunlight. It is our responsibility to make sure that cactus stays alive. But you don't see society raising money to help rescued houseplants or house-plant shelters, or to save sweet corn by converting us to carnivores. You plant murderers, you!

I understand why people relate to animals as fellow people, I do. Pets can be wonderful companions, but they are still animals. Like my cats — it just wouldn't quite be home without them, but there is a distinct difference between them and my children. Wes Jamison, a professor of public relations at Palm Beach Atlantic University in Florida, says this phenomenon that we refer to as the Animal Rights Movement is so far only a Western culture thing. He said there was a progression of five ideas that lead to this:

1. Affluence — your food supply is not only secure but abundant enough that you have no fear of starvation.
2. Urban or suburban living — your animal experience is as a pet rather than as a farm animal.
3. Emotional projection — you are projecting human qualities onto animals.
4. Intelligence projection — you are projecting human intelligence onto animals.
5. Value projection — you are projecting human value of life equality onto animals.

Certainly, we are all free to do what we feel brings quality to our lives, within the law. Certainly, hog farmers aren't going to mind too much that city dwellers are dressing their dogs in poofy dresses as long as they don't have to see it.

But it's when that dog dresser's ideas start to evolve into laws that affect the hog farmer's way of life that this Animal Rights Movement gets its controversy.

I think it's enough for the marketplace to communicate its desire for certain animal management choices through consumer preference. I don't think we need laws to force this onto producers. If enough consumers demanded that their eggs only come from free-ranging chickens, then eventually the industry-wide production practices would change.

There is so much blame placed on farmers or on animal rights activists, depending on which side you're on, but we seem to forget the real crux of the problem: the consumers and their lack of participation in this debate. That's what

makes animal rights activism sketchy — that they're pushing agendas without a real backing from consumers. Consumers are still buying whatever pork chop is on sale, rather than hunting out the pork chop that was cut from the hog that was raised in the wide-open outdoors and anes-

thetized before slaughter. Until more consumers start demanding, and sticking to those demands, to eat animals that were raised a certain way, animal rights activists appear to be — and are, really — just acting on their own agenda.

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